

Collaborative Composition in the Digital Age (A Tale of Two Classes)

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The Course:

ENGL 4832: Writing for the World Wide Web is an upper-division writing course focusing on the challenges of composing texts for publication online. In Spring 2009, Dr. Elizabeth Davis taught two 14-student sections of this course.

The Assignment:

After doing two individual projects, students were asked to collaboratively compose a text about new media and writing using new media to collaborate and write.

The Process:

A lot of stuff we were comfortable with:

Brainstorming a project topic
Considering the rhetorical situation
Drafting, review, revision

But the collaborative and new media aspects of the project brought some new twists:

Formation of working groups
Making decisions about technology applications and the logistics of writing together using new tech tools.

Because of the different skill sets and comfort levels in each section, the two classes ended up taking very different approaches to the assignment.

The Results:

Similarities between the two classes' experiences:

GoogleDocs is great for writers working in small teams.

GoogleDocs has issues with formatting and editing.

It's tough to establish a unified voice and style when working with a lot of other writers.

Administration and coordination are key in collaborative work, especially when technology is involved.

Technology can facilitate better communication when working on a group project (but it doesn't always).

Groups can produce more impressive results than individuals working separately.

Why did the two groups have such different experiences and finished products?

It makes a difference when there are people involved in a group project who have strong tech skills.

There was no administrative/editing/design team in the GoogleDoc class, so there was no group who was responsible for the making executive decisions or capable of producing a uniquely new media text.

Just because a certain technology sounds like it would effectively foster collaboration, that doesn't mean it always works in practice.

What I'm doing differently now:

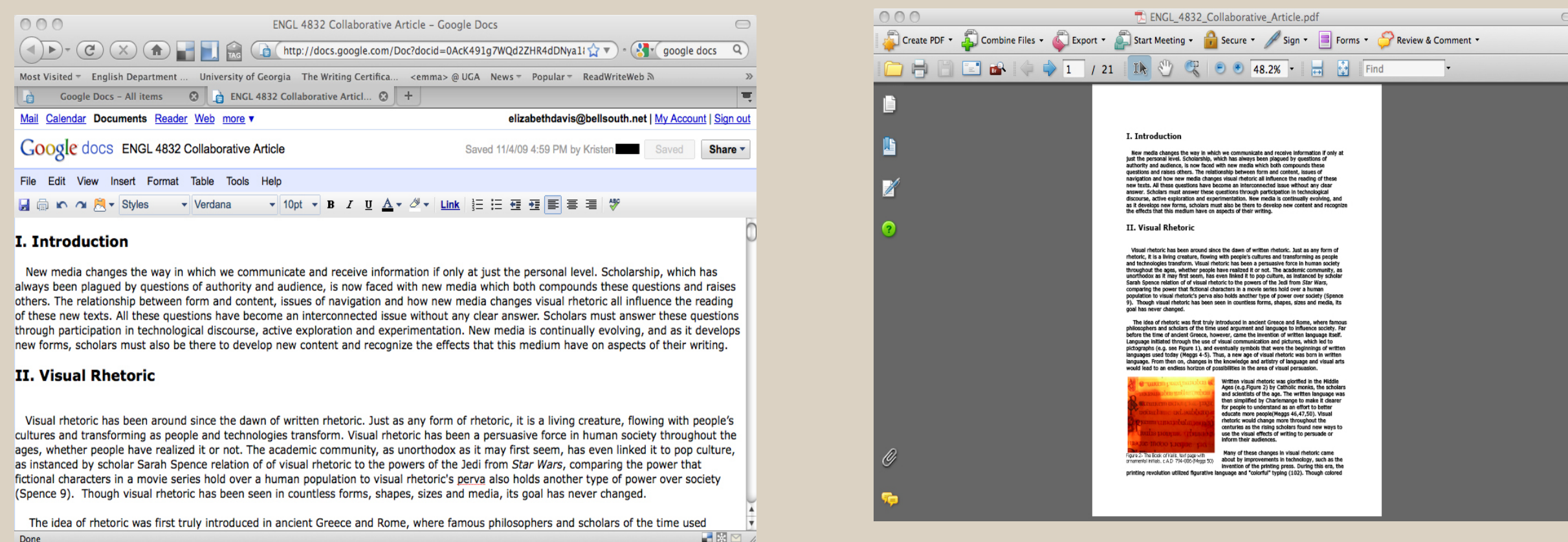
Insisting on a dedicated administrative group whose sole responsibility is coordinating, compiling, and dealing with design/technical issues.

Using GoogleGroups instead of GoogleDocs, so that individuals and small groups can upload different types of files to a shared space where there is also a discussion board and the ability to create pages.

Using tech tools like Joomla that enable those who have little Web design experience and skill to still be able to create sophisticated Web texts/sites.

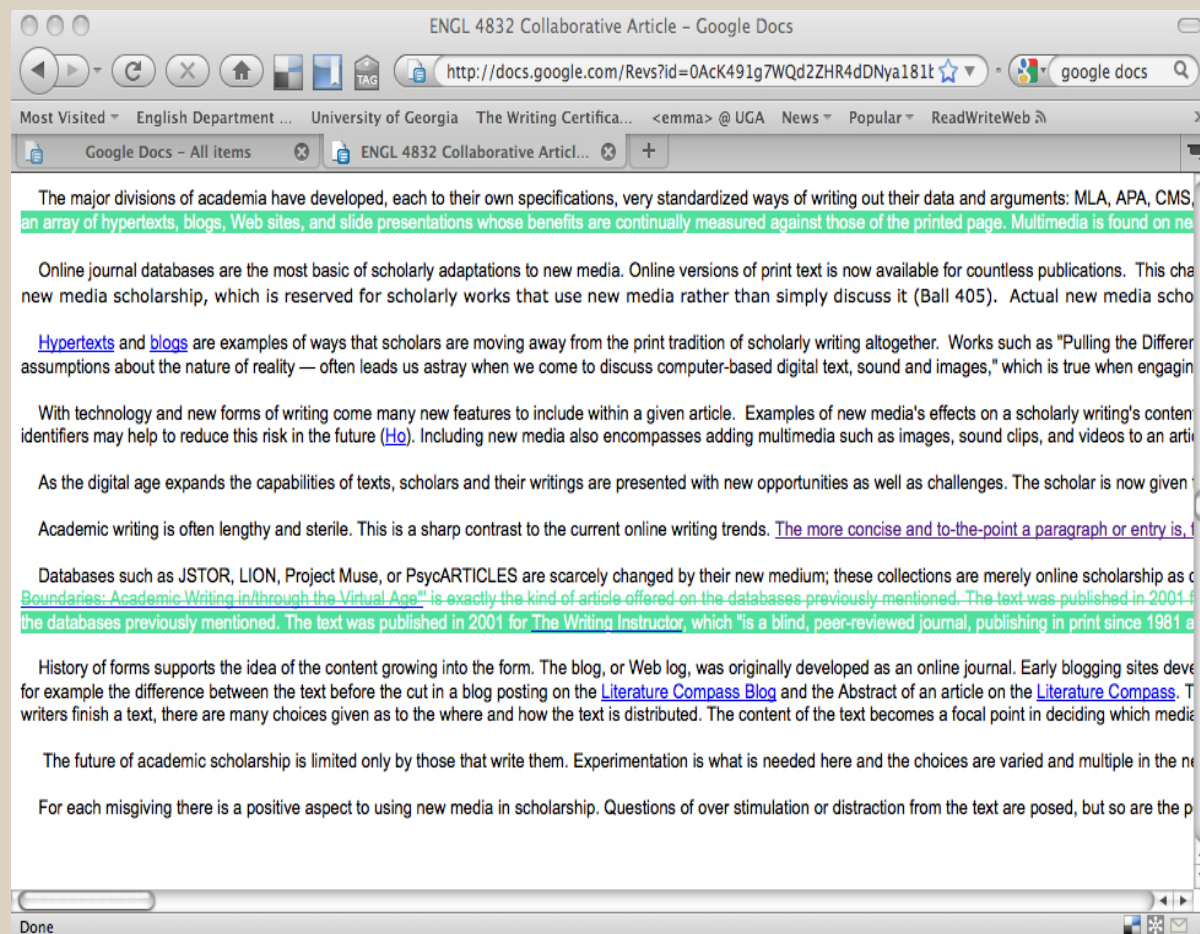
"Because collaborative writing assignments take place in a dynamic situation with particular students, who have particular viewpoints, needs, ambitions, and misconceptions, the potential for collaborative writing to go awry is very real, and professors must manage the collaborative process, from beginning to end." Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing. Bruce W. Speck, 2002

Class 2: A Traditional Research Paper Written and Published with GoogleDocs/PDF



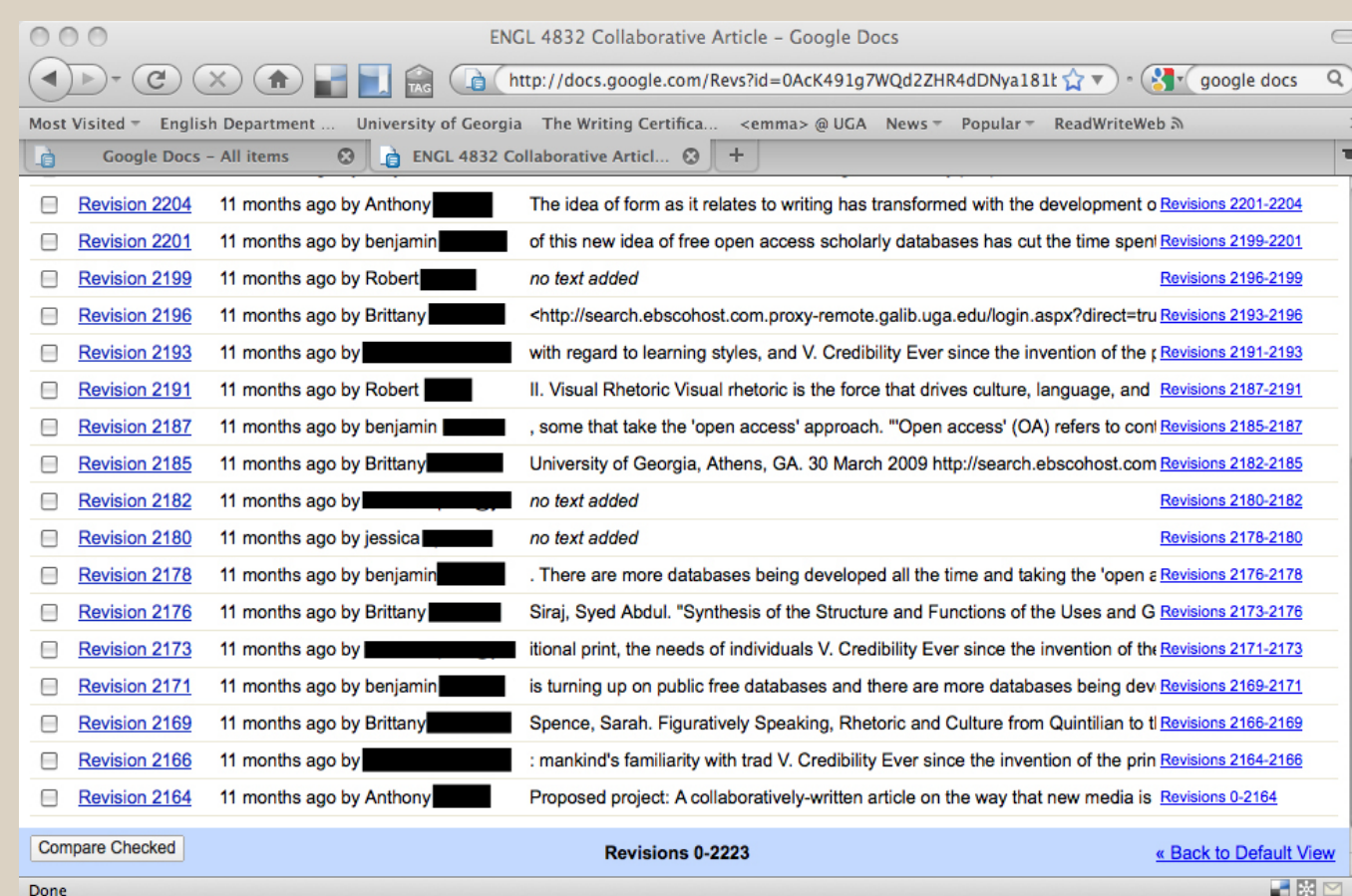
An outline was drafted in a GoogleDoc and small groups of 2-3 people took responsibility for each section.

Most of the writing was done in this GoogleDoc, so 14 people were working on the same Google Doc, often at the same time.



Too many cooks almost spoiled the soup. They experienced accidental deletions, became frustrated at editing over each other, and, once, mistakenly reverted to an earlier version of the document, causing some panic.

By the time the final document was turned in, the GoogleDoc had been edited over 2,600 times.



Reflection after the fact:

"everyday it was something new, something broke down, changed or disappeared." (Ben)

"I found this process really interesting...because it made us question what collaborative writing is. Some portions of the text could not be distinguished as the work of just him or me, but instead showed signs of both." (Anthony)

"with everyone working on one document at the same time, your work could be changed (or even lost) by others." (Liz)

"The research done on the project was more extensive than what I think is usually done on a research project by one person." (Christian)

"[GoogleDocs] allowed us to stay connected as a group, even outside of the classroom." (Jessica)

"The GoogleDoc was always changing, always moving, always rearranging...it was horribly inconvenient and easy to get confused." (Brittany)

"The formatting was almost always messed up and often Google Docs stubbornly refused to let you correct it." (Christina)

"I am not sure the perfect platform for us even exists, but it should allow only two or three group leaders to change the document; somewhere between Google Docs and the Web CT discussion board." (Rhys)